

Video Soldiers

In the occupied highlands of Chiapas, indigenous farmers learn to be filmmakers

STEPHEN S. HOWIE

Every weekend, Ruben, a 22-year-old indigenous Mexican with soft features and rounded shoulders, treks into the jungle in the central highlands of Chiapas. A video camera hidden in his backpack, he leaves the village of Nicolas Ruiz flanked by one or two high-ranking *responsables*, local officials who reduce his chances of being “disappeared.”

Along the way, friends call to him from the doorways of one-room homes with tin roofs and dirt floors: “Ruben, do you have tapes?”

When he responds that he does, they ask, “How many? One, two?” Videotapes are expensive, and the people of Nicolas Ruiz, a town occupied by state police for more than two years, know it’s vital that Ruben have an ample supply.

Deep in the jungle, Ruben believes a local paramilitary group known as *los chinchulines* is secretly training soldiers. In a state with as many military divisions as Indian languages, the paramilitaries are known as the worst of Chiapas’ bad cops, the groups that carry out the dirty work of the government and the *pristas*, local landowners who support the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

In 1997, the most infamous group — with the ironic name Paz y Justicia — attempted to ambush and kill Bishop Samuel Ruiz, the primary mediator between the Zapatistas and the government until his retirement late in 1999. In February 1998, Paz y Justicia members opened fire on a group of peasants returning home after testifying about human rights abuses. One man was fatally wounded. As a human rights worker explained, “What the military is unwilling to do during the day for publicity reasons, the paramilitary will do at night.”

Ruben has also seen the paramilitary at

Stephen S. Howie spent the past two years as a Visiting Lecturer in Literary Nonfiction at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. His first book, The Bluffton Charge: One Preacher’s Struggle for Civil Rights, won the Mammoth Press Book Series Prize for nonfiction in 1998.



Federal troops patrol the road outside of Acteal in Chiapas.

work in broad daylight. Two years ago, his village was invaded by close to 1000 troops — army soldiers, state police, state and federal judicial police, and hooded members of *los chinchulines* — who went house-to-house pointing out those to be arrested. Ruben remembers the day as a chaotic riot of tear gas and street fights, soldiers armed with machine guns advancing toward clusters of indigenous men and women armed with sticks and rocks. After six hours, the military departed with 167 prisoners, all suspected of supporting or being part of the Zapatista Army.

Ruben had just returned from a local college, having run out of money to complete his degree. Suddenly, his community was under siege. State police had converted the town hall into military barracks, and officers with bulletproof vests and M-16s patrolled the streets. Going to the community elders, he asked what could be done. “I wanted to fight,” he said, “but how am I going to fight the army?”

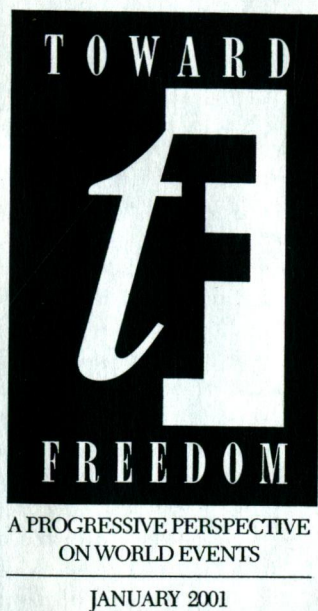
Ruben and more than a dozen other indigenous Chiapans have decided to fight the “low-scale warfare” against their people not with guns, but with legal expertise and videotape. Members of this group, known as *los defensores derechos humanos* (human rights defenders), are spread through the highland villages in pairs. In 1997, they were elected by indigenous

people from hundreds of communities to learn what, if anything, could be done to protect themselves from the daily threats. Ruben and his village partner were elected by almost 6000 people. The *defensores* from the Altamirano region represent 73 communities. In total, 19 *defensores* represent 278 cities, towns, villages, and hamlets scattered across Chiapas.

Most would gladly die for their communities, but how they define themselves in relation to their fellow villagers is difficult to translate. From the time they were children, their communities have been like extended families of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, nieces, and nephews. Decisions that affected the community were made by consensus at the town hall. Graduations and weddings were celebrated on the town basketball court to the beat of salsa bands.

With the army’s arrival, all that changed. Military checkpoints blocked roads leading in and out of town. Farmers feared walking to tend their fields. People whose lives were based on making decisions communally were forbidden to congregate in groups.

“Every time we meet, the police surround us,” Ruben explained. At night, fights broke out between PRI landowners and indigenous villagers. The next day, police rolled through town gathering indigenous suspects and cart-



Maritana Mora

ing them away. Slowly, the fabric of the community began to unravel.

When the Chiapas Media Project began in 1996, signs were still hopeful that the Mexican government would recognize the rights of indigenous Chiapans. The bi-national Media Project raised money by taking "delegations" of foreign visitors along nearly impassable, winding roads to tiny mountain villages. Government troops called project workers "coyotes" and accused them of "smuggling gringos," but eventually let them through.

Once they reached their destination, project delegations distributed donated video cameras in towns without electricity or running water, and held video workshops using generators carted in from the city. Some teenage villagers sat through the workshops just to see *Rambo* movies after the sessions ended. Farmers used the cameras to document the ownership of cattle — "recording cows," as one project worker put it. Wives and daughters filmed the making of tortillas.

In 1998, amidst reports of disappearances and harassment, the Media Project teamed up with human rights lawyer Miguel Angel de los Santos Cruz, and turned their video cameras toward the injustices overwhelming indigenous villages. Roadblocks were being set up. Young men were going to work and never returning; others were being detained, tortured, and forced to sign confessions they didn't write. Towns were overrun by troops. Something had to be done.

Nicolas Ruiz was one of the largest villages under siege. Once, while on his way home, Ruben found the town hall surrounded by government troops. Inside, a meeting was underway. When the soldiers saw his camera, they departed. Ruben and the military have had other standoffs, with Ruben shooting video footage as state police considered whether to shoot back with their guns.

Ruben's appearance and manner don't fit the US idea of a revolutionary. He has a whispery voice that draws in the listener, the hint of a mustache outlining his upper lip, and large, expressive eyes. Wearing a Polo shirt and blue jeans, he's too citified to pass for Poncho Villa.

Brave and unflinching, he talks passionately about human rights. But it's the type of passion people share after a good movie. "When will I finish?" he asks. "When I die, I will finish making videos. When I die, I will finish defending human rights."

Periodically slipping past military road-

blocks and checkpoints, Ruben and the other *defensores* meet secretly in the colonial city of San Cristobal to discuss their troubles and progress. During the day, they learn to become hometown lawyers under the tutelage of Miguel Angel. At night, they go across town to the unmarked house of the Chiapas Media Project, where Mexican filmmakers teach them to edit videos of beaten men, attempted land takeovers, and military helicopters buzzing their villages.

They risk their lives roaming the jungle to find paramilitary training camps and film the troops that patrol their towns. They believe the world will respond if only it sees the injustices they face. They're compelled by memories of their communities before the army and state police arrived, and by the hope that, if they resist, things will eventually change.

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"I have two pencils," Ruben explained. "One is like that pencil there, the other is my video camera. I want the whole world to know what our lives are like here in Chiapas."

In 1998, one of Ruben's videos of a beaten man became the first by a member of *los defensores* used in a Mexican court case. A second project video, showing a Mexican army officer hurling rocks at angry villagers, led the government to pay the medical expenses of a 10-year-old boy who lost an eye during the exchange. The footage clearly demonstrates the tension that permeates Chiapas, beyond the tourist-packed cities, military roadblocks, and washed-out dirt roads of the highlands. It also illustrated how video cameras could potentially expose the unreported military occupation of Chiapas.

In the video, villagers chase a truckload of armed soldiers down a dirt road out of town. The women wear flowery skirts and flat sandals; the boys are barefoot. While they pursue the truck, they wave sticks in the air and chant an ode to their outgoing president: "Zedillo, Bandito! Zedillo, Bandito!" The cameraman's breathing becomes heavy as he chases the procession. The army truck rumbles around a cor-

ner, and an officer is visible between two rows of seated, helmeted troops, lobbing grapefruit-sized rocks back toward the villagers.

"The soldiers are throwing rocks at civilians!" the cameraman shouts, as he runs down the road after them. "The soldiers are throwing rocks!"

Afterwards, a teenager with a bloodstained T-shirt tells the cameraman how the 10-year-old boy was hit in the eye by a rock. The boy's blood is on his shirt. According to project workers, it took the Red Cross ambulance four hours to reach the town along washed-out roads. By the time they arrived, the boy's eye had to be removed. After the videotape was taken to authorities, the army agreed to pay for the boy's surgery, although they refused to admit that the soldiers were responsible.

"The government tells people nothing has happened since [the massacre of 45 civilians in] Acteal," a project worker explained. "They say everything is improving, but the facts are different. There are more soldiers in the villages; there are more checkpoints between the villages. The war now against the communities is not to kill the people, but to kill their hope, to kill their self-esteem."

In three years, the Chiapas Media Project has distributed 40 cameras throughout Chiapas, and trained more than 100 indigenous people in video and computer skills. Documentation from *los defensores* has been forwarded to the UN and the Inter-American Court.

Despite death threats and daily harassment, Ruben and other *defensores* remain dedicated to their elected positions as videomakers and hometown lawyers. In the past year, Ruben has recorded the testimony of a man who was beaten, his nose broken and face covered with blood. He's also recorded the story of two farmers, shot and wounded while talking in the road on the outskirts of town.

It remains unclear whether these videos will lead to change in Nicolas Ruiz or elsewhere in Chiapas. Back in Ruben's hometown, the state police still occupy the town hall. Nicolas Ruiz remains under siege. But Ruben, who could have completed his degree and found more profitable work, continues down his new path as a videographer, intent on finally locating and recording the paramilitary training camp. He's convinced it is somewhere in the forest near his town.

"We have hope because we are united," he explained. "When we are united, it is the government that should be afraid." ♦